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ABSTRACT

A semester-long high school English course brings local professionals into the classroom to help the teacher introduce students to the language arts skills associated with the working world. The five major areas of the course are composition, career interests, income tax, insurance, and goal setting. The first content area, composition, covers specific skills related to writing various business communications, and local businesspeople respond to and evaluate the student letters. The second area, career interests, helps students assess their technical and academic interests, locate the schools in which those interests and skills can be developed, locate a job within an interest area, and interview for the job. A representative from a state employment office is a guest instructor and conducts mock interviews. The third area, income tax, presents material from the Internal Revenue Service and includes a seminar with a local bookkeeper and a question and answer session with a tax consultant. The fourth area, insurance, allows the most contact with local businesspeople in a seven-hour seminar on five major types of insurance. The last section, goal setting, uses film, cassette programs, and community individuals to stress that students can achieve their personal goals through a planned, step-by-step process. (AEA)

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Practical English Involves the Community

by

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To New Teachers:

If you would teach, then understand:
teachers, like gardeners, till reluctant land,
Accept the limits to every crop's yield;
what seems fertile earth may prove barren ground.

Don't attempt teaching a pig to sing;
you'll annoy the pig, and just waste your time.
But plant seeds of truth, and then tend them well;
and pray that just one responds to your care.

C. D. (Bo) Bowen

Three years ago, I began full-time teaching at the high school level. My alma mater, a four-year high school of approximately 225 students in rural Southwest Kansas, invited me to return as a teacher, hoping that I might bring some sense of stability to a language arts department that within eight years had seen a high turnover rate of teachers.

The administration made my teaching responsibilities for the year quite clear except for one class--a semester-length class that someone along the way had entitled "Practical Writing." No teaching syllabus existed; no recent graduate of the school knew what material the course covered; the counselor said, "Do the best that you can; there's no book." The foreboding words of the former teacher, who did answer my letter of inquiry, brought apprehension: "Beware, the juniors and the seniors who take that class are troublemakers, frequently more boys than girls. They're C and D students who need an extra credit of English to meet graduation requirements. If you can keep them involved, you're lucky."

Have three years of teaching this course showed me that I was lucky? Yes, they have, but not in the manner that the former teacher implied. Some of the juniors and seniors taking the class now

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still need an extra language arts credit to meet graduation requirements. More of the students now than earlier earn grades of A through C+ on their projects than C through F -- if that thought carries any validity. The title of the course has changed from Practical Writing to Practical English -- suggesting a complete look at the language arts skills rather than at one specialized skill. More students now than three years ago are commenting--sometimes immediately, sometimes a year or more later--how they have used or are using those skills and attitudes taught in the course. I have been lucky in that several leaders of the local working world have been willing to do as Bowen in the above poem suggests: "Plant seeds of truth, and then tend them well and pray that just one responds to your care." Together, we have "taken the initiative." We agree that we can work together in introducing students to the language arts skills associated with the working world.

The content of the course focuses upon five major areas: composition, career interests, income tax, insurance, and goal-setting. Some of these content areas may not seem appropriate for the typically-described language arts class. The business department should cover income tax and insurance; the guidance counselor as well as the psychology teacher should develop cooperative sessions stressing career interests as well as goal-setting. Business leaders of the community frequently ask, "Why don't you just deal with composition? That's what English is." I can't. Each of these five areas--composition, career interests, income tax, insurance, goal-setting--demands a form of communication, an understanding of terms, a transfer of thought from one individual to another. This exchange continues throughout one's life. And if the other departments of the school are not willing to teach these areas and if the local leaders of the working community and I are willing to pool our resources, then the language arts classroom provides an optimum place for mastering the necessary terms and the skills of the five content areas.

Aspects of the first content area, composition, are stressed

throughout the semester. Memorandum and letter writing demand just as much neatness and accuracy of thought as do income tax and insurance forms. Letters of persuasion and of inquiry require as much precision of thought and organization as do job application forms and résumés. Specific composition skills taught during this section relate to the writing of these: the memorandum, the job order, the letter of inquiry, the letter of appreciation, the letter of condolence, the letter of application for a job, and the résumé.

Community involvement comes when local individuals evaluate the quality of the work that the students have done. For example, a local county clerk cooperates by sending the class a job description of two or more vacancies to be filled at the county court house. After receiving the letters of inquiry about these vacancies, the county clerk then sends each student an application blank to be filled out. The students respond by sending to her not only the completed application blanks but also detailed résumés, based upon their present level of experience for the jobs described. The county clerk then evalutes these credential papers in a class discussion with the students, focusing upon these points: accuracy of response, neatness, use of appropriate grammatical elements (including spelling), clarity of thought, strength of the personal desire for the position available. Having a prospective employer evaluate these written responses stresses a reality of the working world: how well one expresses him or herself can easily determine whether that individual receives a job offer. Furthermore, the employer's comments substantiate what the language arts teacher has been stressing in the classroom.

The second content area, career interests, involves these areas: assessing one's technical and academic interests, locating proper schools whereby those interests and skills can be developed, locating a job within an interest area, undergoing an interview for a prospective job.

The section begins with the high school counselor administering to the students the Kuder Preference Inventory and then in-

dividually interpreting the results. With these results, students use the Dictionary of Occupational Titles to find related clusters of possible vocations relating to the interest areas. Following this activity, the students review the necessary academic and technical skills associated with these possible vocations. The counselor then uses the seminar approach to inform the students about the types of schools available for these various professions: vocational technical schools; public as well as private colleges and universities; proprietary schools; 12-month, two-year, four-year, or other length programs.

A representative of the local Kansas Division of Employment adds considerable expertise to this content area. Pamphlets and discussions focus on knowing the Kansas labor laws and rights, using the Job Service Center to find a job, making a job application, preparing a résumé, preparing for and taking an interview, selling one's self to an employer, as well as keeping a job once an individual has one.

The main thrust of his presentations deal with attitude: An employee's success with any job lies more with his attitude toward his employer and fellow employees than with the use of his technical skill. Frequently, this representative conducts mock interviews for and with the students, giving pointers about these matters: dressing appropriately, being prompt, speaking with confidence, giving the interviewer due respect, discussing salary, closing an interview, making a follow-up on the interview.

The third section, income tax, lasts approximately six weeks. Supplied with material from the Internal Revenue Service, the students proceed through these tax forms: the 1040A, the 1040 and its accompanying Schedules A and B, and the Farm Supplement. As they work through the problems of these various forms, the students acquire a working vocabulary useful in all aspects of taxation: deductions, itemization, filing status, interest, dividend, adjusted gross income, W-2, W-4, special withholding allowance, zero bracket income, FICA, voluntary compilance, self-employment tax, depreciation. Studying taxation, the students gain skill in such areas as

following directions, understanding terms, deriving appropriate figures from appropriate resources, and conveying that information accurately and clearly on the appropriate forms.

This unit frequently includes a two-to-three day seminar with one of the bookkeepers of a local business. Here students are exposed to necessary terms and their nature in a business organization: work orders, purchase orders, sick leave, fringe benefits, methods of payment, fiscal and the calendar financial year, contracts, posting, auditing, as well as others. As she explains her responsibilities to the local school district, one bookkeeper stresses the importance of precision, neatness, and promptness--whether one is working with figures or expressing a thought.

The income tax unit frequently closes by having a local tax consultant visit with the students about questions that have arisen. Issues concerning deductions as well as exemptions usually concern the students the most. One student questioned if he involved in a common law marriage situation could claim a deduction for the mate.

Of all of the units of study presented, the insurance program allows the most contact with the local businessmen. The two local independent agencies use their own offices to present approximately a seven-hour seminar on the five major types of insurance which each individual during his or her lifetime must consider: homeowner's, fire and casualty, life, medical, as well as vehicle. Vehicle insurance interests the students the most, especially when the agent discusses how one's driving record affects the premium rate. The rates for medical and life insurance suddenly seem high when the agent figures how much per year a family of four spends on these two items. In these discussions, the students are mastering insurance terms that will prove valuable in later conversations: liability, additional living expense, cash flow, replacement value, market value, workmen's compensation, deductability, comprehension, tenant homeowner's policy, etc.

From this unit comes a study of the classified ads of the local daily newspaper. Each student finds an ad for a job that he, a high school graduate, is qualified to accept. After determining whether

he has found a good, a blind, or a glittering ad, he determines his gross salary for a 40-hour week as well as for a working year. With this figure, the student makes a budget of his gross income by allotting various percentages for various living expenses. For example, 20 percent goes for food, 23 percent for housing, ten percent for transportation, 17 percent for personal income taxes. With the amount budgeted for housing, the student uses the want ads again to find suitable housing. With the amount budgeted for food, the student uses the grocery ads to purchase one week's worth of supplies. Such an exercise makes the student aware of at least two points: First, the job which he took may not provide enough income for the standard of living that he wants to maintain; therefore, he must make some kind of adjustment--taking on a part-time job, living in a second choice type of housing, adjusting the budget in some way. Second, the positions that pay the more and that provide the better fringe benefits require more training than he now possesses; this insight causes some of the students to set higher goals for themselves. They see more easily that they have the choice to become the individual that they desire.

The last unit of the course deals with goal setting. Films, cassette programs, and community individuals are used to stress that each student can become what the individual imagines himself to be. He needs to have a definite purpose for living as he works towards the fulfillment of a particular goal. He sense of self-confidence comes by persistency--daily overcoming all forms of fear in and around him. He knows reaching this goal involves personal sacrifice; therefore, he takes each setback as temporary and moves onward. Students see these traits illustrated particularly well in the film, "John Baker's Last Race," the story of a University of New Mexico long-distance runner who refused to let a terminal disease overcome his joy of coaching a group of elementary students.

With this unit, students are asked to complete a goal-setting sheet, divided into three general areas: five goals accomplished during the past year, five goals to accomplish this year, and five

goals to accomplish in ten years. The goals are then prioritized--the one giving the most satisfaction, the one demanding the most energy, the one demanding the most cooperative effort from other individuals. Along with this goal-setting activity, students develop a weekly budget of their time and then determine the percentage of time devoted each week to the four psychological components of the well-balanced life: physical, spiritual, mental, social. Representing those students who made some insights into and about their lives, one student noted this: "Only .5 percent of my week's time is devoted to spiritual activities; I'll never get anywhere at that rate." This student noticed that one's activities can easily determine the kind of individual he or she is and becomes; the language arts teacher can then hope that the student soon reaches one other conclusion: the language that we use reveals to some extent the type of person that we are also.

Are there drawbacks to a practical writing course such as the one which I have described? Yes, but they are insignificant drawbacks. Scheduling difficulties appear minor when students appreciate an opportunity to visit honestly with a local employer. What should be covered in this or in that language arts course becomes somewhat trivial when a student wants an understanding of several areas to visit coherently with a local businessman. Not having a regular classroom text to show upon demand seems appropriate when students are reading, writing, listening, and speaking with the language arts texts of the community--its leaders, its newspapers, its application blanks, its résumé forms, its constitutency.

"Taking the initiative" with the leaders of the working world will not, as Bowen would say in his poem, bring "fertile earth" from "barren ground" in every student-teaching relationship. But a teacher must try to bring forth what can be brought forth--that is the element of understanding involved. That challenge becomes easier to accept when the leaders of the working world within the local community agree to "plant the seeds of truth" with the language arts teaching staff. "Taking the initiative" produces more positive results when it is team-shared.